

## AMBIVALENCE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*: IRRESOLUTION OF IDENTITY

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### Abstract

This study is aimed to uncover ambivalence in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, entitled *The Lowland*. In this study, Lahiri portrays how ambivalence occurs to Indian immigrants. These Indian immigrants are described as individuals who have spent many years in America. They come to America to continue their study. It implies that they are educated people. However, they are not able to adapt American culture well. At the same time, they also dismiss some of their origin culture. As a result, Lahiri argues that these Indian immigrants face irresolution of identity. In addition, a concept of post-colonialism by Homi K. Bhabha is applied in this study. One of Bhabha's ideas in his post-colonialism is called ambivalence. The result of this study discloses that there is a high possibility for immigrants to suffer for irresolution of identity as the effect of different and conflicting cultures they have to face.

Keywords: ambivalence, irresolution of identity, immigrants, post-colonialism

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, some people from former colonized country tend to face some difficulties to define their identity. These difficulties occur as the effect of mixing culture when their country was colonized. In colonization era, the colonizer forced the colonized to adapt their culture. However, the colonized people are never able to adapt the colonizer's culture completely. In fact, they just imitate their culture and they fail to be a part of them. As stated by Ashcrof (2007: 62), the movements generated by colonialism have developed distinctive cultures. It implies that colonization has created acculturation which comes from different cultures between colonized and colonizer.

In colonization era, the colonizer's domination maddened the colonized. At the same time, the colonized also admired the colonizer for their power and their 'beautiful' life. This admiration keeps growing in colonized land even though the colonization era has come to the end. Consequently, in post-colonial era, many people who come from former colonized country imitate some ways of life from their former colonizer country. Some of them are also immigrated to the former colonizer country in order to get greater life. However, this action leads them to involve in ambivalence. Bhabha (1994: 22) explains ambivalence as one of the concepts in post-colonialism which defines a condition faced by the people of the former colonized. It relates to the identity search process carried out by the colonized society due to an

obstacle to escape from the post-colonial situation.

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explains that ambivalence emerges due to post-colonialism. Primarily, it is because of the relation between the colonized and the colonizer. Furthermore, people in a former colonized country seem to reflect themselves with the colonizer country. They assumed that they will get a better life if they are just like the colonizer. For example, even though India has declared their independence from Great Britain, a lot of Indian citizen migrates to England for getting a better education, a nobler job, and settled life. When Indians run their life in England, they are going to face some obstacles, related to different cultures between East (India) and West (England). At the end, these people will be confused with their identity. They are not Indian since they adapt some Western culture in life and they are not Western because they still have Indian culture in their way of thinking and living. This condition is marked as ambivalence; the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that constructs counter knowledge within the terms of negotiation rather than a negation (Bhabha: 1994: 22).

Related to the idea above, it can be stated that ambivalence does not relate to negation. In this case, it does not focus on clashes between western and eastern culture. On the other hand, the emphasis between these different cultures is negotiation. When colonized people try to adapt

colonizer's culture, they confront a case, that is, to negotiate their origin culture with the new one. Colonized's desire to be like colonizer dominates their action in confronting these cultures. Consequently, they face irresolution of identity, a condition when someone is not able to recognize and to decide her identity.

The term of ambivalence is first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting other thing (Young, 1995:161). In psychoanalysis, the ambivalence is formed because of the changes upon wanting one thing and other thing continually which finally results ambivalent. Ambivalence also refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action (Young, 1995: 161). The contrast feeling occurs at the same time, for instance like and dislike toward something at the same time, or hate to do something but must to do something toward object or action. When the contrast feeling occurs at the same time, this condition creates dilemma.

Meanwhile, according to John and Cacioppo in Larsen (2007: 1), ambivalence is assumed as one implication that is better to think of positive and negative as separate dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single dimension ranging from positive to negative. The implication of positive and negative thinking can view that ambivalence represent thought, in one side positive and other side negative, which affects

people at the same time. This idea relates to Bhabha's concepts. As quoted by Ashcroft and Tiffin (2007: 11), Bhabha states that between the colonizer and colonized are implicated in ambivalent. It can be inferred that the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is ambivalent. Therefore, the ambivalent between the colonized and colonizer can be related to hybridity. This condition can be related to hybridity because ambivalence decenters authority from its position of power, the authority may also become hybridized when it is placed in colonial context and finds itself dealing and often inflected by other cultures.

## DISCUSSION

In this part, the ambivalence in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is reflected through two characters, Gauri and Subhash. These two characters are described as Indians who grew in India, but move to America to continue their life. They spend their times for many years in this western country. Lahiri portrays how Gauri and Subhash have to experience two different cultures at the same time. This condition leads them to behave like American even though they are Indian. It is depicted in this following quotation:

*Most of the other Indian women wore saris. But in spite of her jeans and boots and belted cardigan, or perhaps because of them, Gauri knew she stood out. (The Lowland, page 206).*

The quotation above exposes how Gauri tries to replace her identity with the new one. Gauri imitates western culture by changing her appearance. Actually, her imitation toward western culture uncovers that she is not a Western. Her satisfaction to look different with other Indian women reveals that she is not able to completely adapt Western culture. Lahiri portrays how Gauri seems to have a new identity but she does not. In fact, her society is still Indian. She makes friends and hangs out with Indian women. It shows that she just imitates Western but she is still Indian.

In addition, Gauri's failure to leave her Indian identity is also depicted through her formal identity card. It is exposed in this quotation:

*'Renewing her Indian passport when it expired. But she had never returned to India'. (The Lowland, page.284).*

Gauri's decision not to come back to India implies her rejection toward her real identity. In this case, she feels more comfortable with their new life in western country. After living in a new place with different cultures, it makes her thinking that her culture is not as nice as other cultures. Then, she chooses to build a new identity for herself. However, she cannot be too apart with her previous identity. It can be revealed for the obligation that requires her to renew her passport regularly. It strengthens the idea that she cannot have a new identity because she will never be able to completely erase her old

identity. In fact, facing different cultures at the same time tend to place her in a gray zone, which is between American and Indian. She seems to become American but she keeps Indian.

Besides, Lahiri illustrates how Indian is crazy of being western through the way of life. In *The Namesake*, Gauri is described to act like western people. However, it does not mean that she is able to be a part of Westen, as implied in the quotation below.

*"In spite of her western clothes, her western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable".(The Lowland, page.286).*

Lahiri argues even though a person adapts another culture in her life, it does not totally make her lose her own culture. It is because this person tries to compare her culture with others. Indirectly, she is still with her culture. When Gauri changes her way of dressing, her way of thinking academically and her way of speaking English with a foreign accent, it reveals that she still holds her culture. In this case, Gauri experiences identity crisis. When she leaves India and lives in America, the society and environment change. In India, she feels that she is nothing instead of a widow. On the other hand, in America she can express herself and she can work outside. She seems to leave her Indian culture as she left India and to adopt American culture. She removes her saris and gets dressed in

American Style. She also tries to speak English although she cannot ignore her foreign accent. Through this description, Lahiri emphasizes that a lot of efforts to adapt a new culture does not mean to be able to change identity.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri also declares that someone will never be able to completely remove his identity even though he has spent their times to live with a different culture for numerous years. It is represented by Subhash, an Indian character who has left his country for long times.

*"The day after they arrived her father sat for a ceremony to honor her grandfather, who had died a few months before".(The Lowland, page.234).*

Lahiri shows how Subhash, the main character in *The Lowland*, still clearly remembers and understands Indian tradition even though he never comes back to India for years. When his father wants to do a ceremony to honor his grandfather's death, he still remembers what to do to in this ceremony. He keeps taking a part in this ceremony, just like Indian. At this point, Lahiri declares that even though Subhash stays and adopts western society but he is not a western. However, Lahiri also depicts that he is not Indian anymore since she does not completely behave like Indian, as exposed in this following quotation.

*There were hotels he might have entered in this part of the city to have a whiskey or a beer, to fall into a conversation with*

*strangers. To forget the way his parents behaved, to forget the things Gauri had said. (The Lowland, page 134-135).*

When Subhash goes back to India, he refuses to act like Indian. He wants to be recognized as an American. When he meets his college friends or professors in a party, he behaves like the way an American behaves. He enjoys drinking whiskey and beers. He has a conversation with strangers and wants them to define him as a citizen of America. In this case, Lahiri uncovers how Subhash suffers for irresolution of identity. Subhash is represented as a person who cannot declare himself as an American even though he keeps trying to act like the way American does. At the same time, he is not regarded as an Indian by his family and colleague in India since his way of life has changed.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, in her novel, *The Lowland*, Lahiri tries to state that people from former colonized country will never be able to completely change their identity even though they have spent numerous years in former colonizer country. In fact, different cultures in these two different societies will lead them to involve in ambivalence. Consequently, they are going to suffer for irresolution of identity. Through two characters in *The Lowland*, Gauri and Subhash, Lahiri illustrates how this irresolution of identity

is captured by their unawareness to be rejected by American and Indian at the same time,

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